



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

As if being plagued by adware and spyware wasn't bad enough, David Robinson also has to contend with scammers insulting his manhood – and an awkward customer on the other side of the world

I'd just sent last month's copy to *Shopper's* production editor and congratulated myself for only being a week late when I got a 'You have new mail' message. It was a receipt from PayPal – the eBay payment system – for £2,015 that I don't remember spending.

Discarding the possibility that senility has progressed to the stage where I wouldn't remember spending such an amount, I read further. According to the receipt I had purchased a willy-expanding machine for £2,000, plus £15 for postage. It must be a bloody big machine.

I was livid. Outraged. Whether I was more upset at being stuck with a bill for £2,000 than the implied insult to my manhood is a moot point; actually, being a Yorkshireman, it was the money.

The receipt had a button on it and a caption saying that if I had a problem with the payment, I should click on it for assistance. Of course I had a problem... click.

However, something didn't feel right, so I unplugged my network connection immediately. Using a different computer – just in case my laptop had been infiltrated by

malware – I logged on to my PayPal account and found that the balance was zero. So I sent a copy of the email receipt to eBay, which later confirmed that it was a spoof.

PHISH FINGERS

I guess there can't be many readers dumb enough to fall for the standard phishing messages that ask you to confirm your account details; we get loads of them all the time even for accounts at banks we've never been to. Enough warnings have been given in the media that the return the rogues are getting must be falling all

the time. This, though, looks like a clever twist on the phishing theme. Enraged by the thought that somebody's got hold of your account details and been spending your cash (especially on something both ludicrous and ludicrously expensive) your first reaction is to follow the 'solve my problem' link they offer you to get it resolved. And that, of course, is exactly what they want you to do.

In this instance I suspect that the link goes to a site that asks you to confirm various account details, which is something I would never do. And, as I'm sure you've been told before, you shouldn't either, no matter how sure you think you are about the reliability of the site. However, what I was really worried about was something downloading some executable code that would find and send private information to a criminal without me knowing. Not that it's there to find; I never use Microsoft's password-saving option for any site or program that involves money or financial details and I never store account numbers or passwords anywhere on my computer. Even so, it's always better to be safe than sorry.

Just to be sure I also changed my PayPal and eBay passwords to something long, complex and impossible to guess, with a mixture of



characters and digits. I also sent an email to PayPal's support team asking if there's a way to put a block on any payments until I give them the all-clear. Two days later I got a message back that simply repeats everything the website says about basic security. Clearly the company's tech support people can't/won't/don't read what's being asked of them as they made no reference to the question I asked about suspending payments.

It's a shame that the convenience of online banking and shopping has to be tainted by thieves and rogues, but life has always had its dangers and, thankfully, getting mugged on the internet doesn't involve a fractured skull or a knife in the ribs. Just be careful out there.

AD ENOUGH

While we're on the subject, I've become absolutely sick to death of adware filling my screen full of unwanted pop-ups. Even though any lay person would struggle to grasp the difference, this rubbish isn't technically part of the 'computer virus' family, which is why your virus-checker doesn't do anything to stop it. Fortunately for the folks who sell virus-checkers these things fall into a different class of nuisance and they can flog you yet another operating system add-on to stop it happening. That's another expense that you shouldn't have and another system overhead to further sap away the performance of your already overloaded computer.

I decided to try another approach and ditched Microsoft Internet Explorer in favour of Mozilla's Firefox browser. You can turn on IE's pop-up blocker, but I found that so many legitimate sites use pop-ups that you end up being constantly asked whether you want to allow this or that pop-up and the result was just as annoying as the original problem. Anyway, the pop-up blocker had no effect at all on the adware that messes with the Registry, and I still got loads of unwanted ads, including ones for willy-enhancing machinery – which I ignored, honest. Ensuring that all Microsoft's latest security updates were in place achieved absolutely nothing.

I can report that since switching to Firefox browsing has been quicker and more convenient, thanks to features such as multi-page browsing, and the adware attacks simply stopped. However, Firefox isn't perfect. There are a few sites it doesn't seem to be able to handle correctly. For example, at the top of the home page of www.auto66.com, a motorsport club, there's a strip of options that should have drop-down menus, but

BOOK OF THE MONTH

The Art of Computer Virus Research and Defense

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25

SUPPLIER www.compman.co.uk

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There can hardly be any among us who have not at some time been inconvenienced – or worse – by some kind of computer virus. As you've seen this month, my choice of browser and other ways I use my computer are strongly influenced by both the presence and fear of viruses and other undesirable code getting on my computer and causing me to lose data or money. And the best starting point in dealing with the threat is to understand it.

with Firefox they don't drop down so you can't navigate the site. If your Firefox works OK on this page then please let me know.

I fired up IE and looked at the page to see how it's supposed to work. The drop-down menus worked but, within 30 seconds of starting IE, the



There aren't a lot of books on viruses to choose from and, unlike some, this book won't teach you how to write code that does bad things. The author, Peter Szor, seeks to educate and inform you about the different forms of malware and how best to defend your PC against them.

Szor is Symantec's chief virus researcher so he's ideally placed to impart this knowledge.

Among the topics he covers are the history of computer viruses, self replication, terminology, categories of malware and the environments and strategies they use, infection strategies, in-memory and stealth strategies, anti-virus defence techniques, memory scanning and disinfection, worm defence, network defence and malicious code analysis.

As you might expect, this book requires some effort, but you don't have to be a programmer or IT guru to benefit from it; you just need a reasonable knowledge of your computer's hardware and operating system anatomy and some patience and persistence. Stick with it and your overall knowledge of these attacks will make you more employable and also, hopefully, help you avoid financial loss.

This is a clever twist on the phishing theme. Enraged by the thought that somebody's got hold of your account details, your first reaction is to follow the 'solve my problem' link

perishing ads were back again and I had to use Ad-Aware (see www.lavasoft.com for your free copy) to get rid of them – yet again.

If you haven't yet switched to Firefox (go to www.mozilla.org for your free copy) then I suggest you give it a try, but please bear in mind that some sites might not work as expected.

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

I've just received a phone call from Mike, the accountant for one of our larger clients. He's been to see a new supplier that can reduce some of their principal material costs by around 25 per cent. In today's competitive business climate, that's a lot. They've had trouble controlling stocks of materials from their existing suppliers so Mike's boss wants to introduce a batch control system based on barcodes when the new supplier starts

to ship goods to them. He wants each batch to be identified uniquely and to have a label that shows size, weight, grades, colours and so on. Can we do that? Like Bob the Builder, yes we can!

Can we have it up and running with software on the supplier's computer in time for the first

limited English (if we're lucky) and used to dealing with software that uses a different alphabet. Then there's printing the batch labels. These are going to have to be both tough and weatherproof. Can they get supplies of the stuff to print on? Can we get the right quality using a laser printer or should they use a specialist thermal transfer type? Can you get those in Vladivostok? If not, how long does it take to get one there? How easy is it to get them through customs? Dunno. Dunno. Dunno.

"What kind of internet connection do they have?"

"33K dial-up modem." So supporting them by VPN is out as well. This one's going to take some doing, but Big Boss insists that we try. I refuse to promise success in his timescale on the grounds that if you don't know you can deliver there's no point in making the promise. The difficulties are all human rather than technical, but they can be the hardest to overcome. Bob the Builder never has to work like this.

I arrange to meet Mike and discuss it on his return. He flies back today, and has one other difficulty to deal with; he's also suffering from hay fever. I don't know who's got the worse combination of problems, him or me. I hope the Aeroflot plane doesn't have an outside loo. And I hope he has his dark suit with him. ☹

shipment? The Big Boss is insistent that we do this.

"When's the first shipment?"

"In six weeks."

Oh dear. We'll need to be producing labels at least two weeks before the goods ship, so that leaves us a month. And I'm going on holiday in three weeks' time.

I ask Mike how he is. Not very well apparently. Got a severe case of the trots due to some prawns he ate last night. "By the way, where are you? Your voice sounds very, er, echoey."

"Sat on the loo in my hotel bathroom in Moscow." Too much information!

"So where's the supplier based?"

"Vladivostok."

Oh, for goodness' sake. Not only do we have a project with a tight deadline and a very sketchy spec, but the user's going to be God knows how many thousand miles away with

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